



# Mental Health, Wellness, and Industry Culture of Culinary and Hospitality Professionals: An Exploratory Study

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# Foreward

## Gratitude to the Study Funder

In an industry as demanding as hospitality, the well-being of its workers often takes a backseat to the relentless pursuit of service excellence. In 2023, Celebrate Wellness emerged from this backdrop as a beacon of hope and support for those dedicated professionals. Founded with a profound commitment to the mental health and wellness of hospitality workers, our mission transcends the boundaries of individual companies to embrace the community as a whole. Our roots are deeply embedded in the personal stories of resilience and vulnerability shared by those we aim to support. These narratives not only highlight the challenges faced but also underscore the transformative power of storytelling in breaking down the stigmas surrounding mental health and wellness.

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*“The hospitality industry is known for its grinded-out mentality of working long hours, nights, and weekends with constant movement and flow. At the end of your shift, you’re either amped up and have a hard time relaxing, or you feel exhausted. Although that’s the nature of the industry, it then adds to the expectation of long hours throughout the week and limited days off. We as an industry need to really understand how that impacts our teams and how we manage this reality.”*

*“Being in an atmosphere that makes you feel special, wanted, and relaxed is magic to those of us who are true lifelong hospitalitarians. But, there’s a stigma to mental health and wellness that portrays there is something wrong with taking care of yourself, and we need to change that perspective. It’s so important for us to continue to look at how we improve the industry, and we believe the investment in mental health and wellness is the best way to do that.”*

*-Josh Grapski Co-Founder of Celebrate Wellness*

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These are some of the narratives that prompted the Celebrate Wellness program to trust the power of storytelling and base our mission upon those human connections.

*“I drank every shift. I went to the late nights at 2 AM twice weekly when I knew I had to be at work the next morning. I had that whole unbalanced lifestyle and in hindsight, it was awful. I don’t know how I survived. Now that I don’t do that anymore, I can look back and see how easy it is to get sucked into that lifestyle.”*

*“Working in the bar scene and living the bar life for a couple of years straight really took a drain on my mental and physical well-being to the point where there were suicidal attempts.”*

*“As beautiful as the restaurant industry is, we are giving all of our time to other people and not thinking about ourselves. When I’m on the right track of eating well, getting enough rest, and taking personal time, I see a difference in myself.”*

*“The whole problem came from being taught and molded into believing that the customer’s need came before our own. We have to be taking care of ourselves to take care of others.”*

*“I would just start putting a price on a thing that didn’t deserve a price. I thought I could make this amount of money on Christmas Eve or be with my family. And I chose that path anyway because it will alleviate me paying my bills next month.”*

Through our stories and the desire to improve the mental health and wellness of hospitality professionals, Celebrate Wellness provides mental health and wellness support, regardless of their ability to pay. Our aim is straightforward. To reduce the stigma surrounding mental health and wellness within hospitality, help hospitality employers in company changes, and continue the conversation so no one goes at this alone.

# Introduction

In the United States, the hospitality and leisure industry is a significant employment sector, boasting a workforce of 15.11 million. Historically, discussions surrounding hospitality professionals' mental health and wellness have been informal, often taking place during pre-shift duties or over drinks post-shift. Despite the clear need, industry-wide solutions to address these concerns have been scarce. The COVID-19 pandemic further heightened the situation, leading to career disruptions and financial instability for many within the industry. This has heightened mental health issues, including stress, anxiety, and depression, while also introducing new obstacles to seeking help.

As the industry emerges into a post-pandemic world, there's growing scrutiny of its culture to foster a better support system for employees. The study serves as a needs assessment, raising public awareness about the pressing concerns within the hospitality sector. The ultimate goal is to encourage hospitality companies to better understand their employees' needs and provide the necessary resources and education to enhance employee retention. By promoting a psychologically safe working environment, the industry can hope to see a significant shift in its cultural landscape.

The study focuses on three primary objectives: exploring hospitality professionals' mental health and wellness needs, understanding the barriers they face in seeking help, and analyzing the prevailing culture within the hospitality industry.

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## What We Knew Before the Study

The World Health Organization emphasizes mental health as a fundamental human right, necessitating support for those afflicted with mental health disorders. This need is particularly pronounced in the hospitality sector, where 80% of employees grapple with mental health concerns attributed to the high-pressure and fast-paced nature of the environment. This sector notably suffers from the highest rates of illicit drug use and ranks third in heavy alcohol consumption among industries, signaling a pressing need for intervention and support.

Pfizer defines wellness as the daily practice of healthy habits for better physical and mental outcomes. However, participation in company offered wellness programs remains low, hindered by the demanding nature of hospitality work, time constraints, and a lack of motivation.

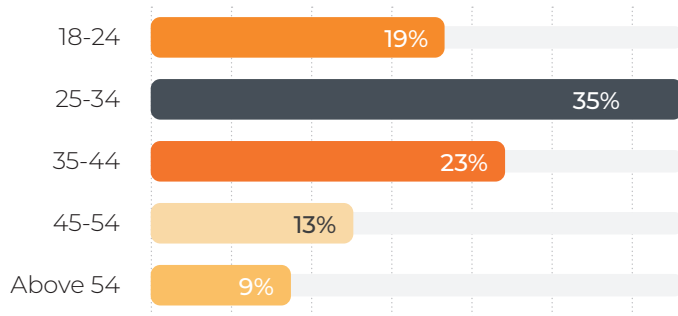
This challenge is compounded by significant barriers to help-seeking, including financial limitations, stigma, social and cultural factors, and a general lack of awareness or readiness to seek help. Notably, a study by *Not 9 to 5* highlighted that a majority of Canadian hospitality workers refrained from seeking help due to financial reasons, further heightened by the industry's widespread lack of health insurance coverage.

The concept of industry culture emphasizes the importance of inclusivity, empathy, and strong interpersonal relationships for enhancing team performance and employee well-being. However, findings from The Burnt Chef Project's 2021 Mental Health Survey reveal a lack of confidence among workers in discussing mental health issues with their peers and managers, raising concerns about psychological safety within the UK hospitality industry.

# Statistics

This report is based on the comprehensive analysis of anonymous survey responses gathered from 422 hospitality industry employees. The data has been aggregated and interpreted through a structured questionnaire comprising multiple-choice questions and open-ended responses to provide an insightful overview. This analysis offers a revealing snapshot of current perceptions surrounding mental health practices in the workplace, alongside proposing targeted support to foster improved mental health conditions and workplace culture within the hospitality sector.

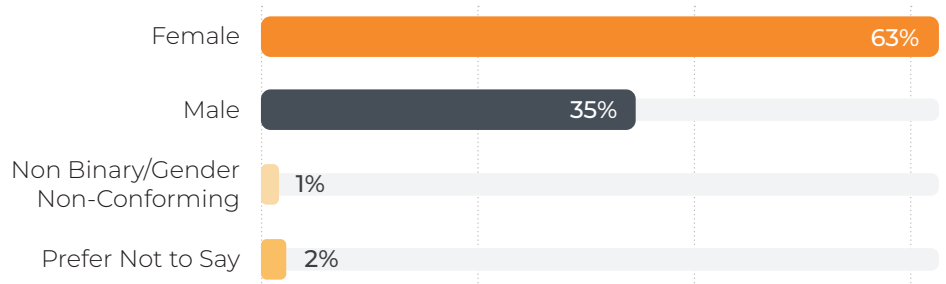
## Age of Respondents



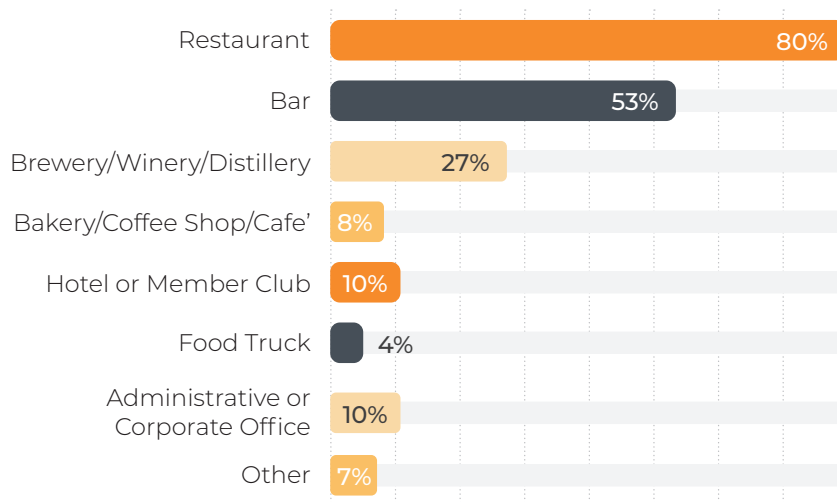
Of those who responded, **356** are Caucasian/White, **21** are Hispanic, **14** are African American/Black, **10** are Multiple Ethnicity, **6** are Asian/Pacific Islander, and **2** are American Indian/Alaskan Native.

**56** of the **409** respondents identified as LGBTQ+

## Gender Identity



## Workplace of Respondents

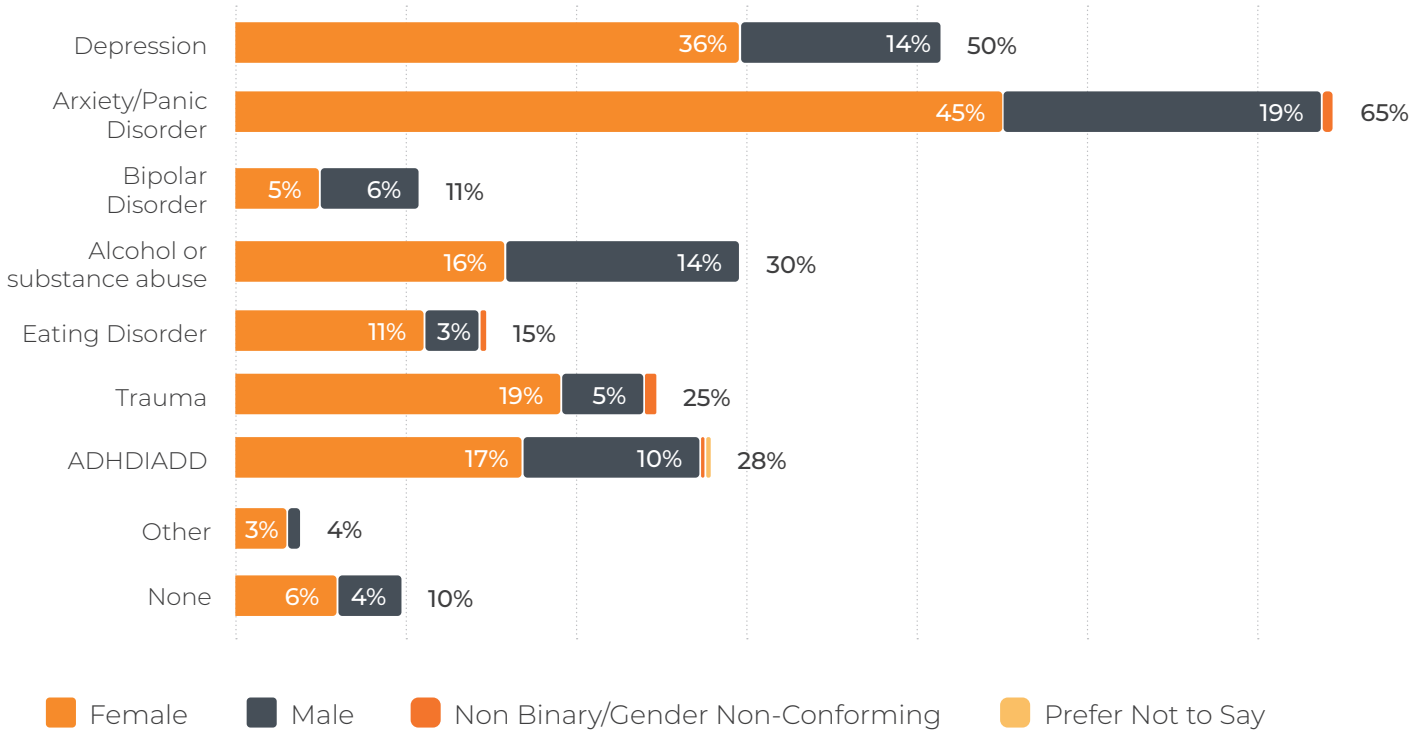


**51%** Front of the House  
**23%** Management  
**13%** Back of the House  
**3%** Directors  
**2%** Owners  
**7%** Other

\*\*Respondents have selected multiple answers for this question

# Statistics

## Mental Health



\*\*Respondents have selected multiple answers for this question

The findings of the study reveal significant insights into the mental health challenges faced by the respondents. Of those surveyed, 244 individuals reported experiencing anxiety or panic, with a notable 25% falling within the 25-34 age bracket. Furthermore, half of the respondents disclosed suffering from depression, indicating the prevalence of mental health issues among our industry workers.

Among Hispanic participants, 61% identified anxiety and depression as their foremost mental health concerns, with alcohol and substance abuse being the next most significant issue for 33% of these respondents. The LGBTQ+ community also reported high rates of mental health challenges, with 53% experiencing anxiety or panic and 33% having encountered trauma.

Additionally, for individuals aged 18-24, eating disorders emerged as the third most common mental health concern, following depression and anxiety or panic. These findings show the critical need for targeted mental health support and interventions within the hospitality industry, particularly for young adults and diverse groups.

Respondents also disclosed other mental health challenges in open-ended responses that affect their work, such as:

*Seasonal Depression, Perfectionism, Family Trauma. Alcoholic Parents, Parenting Children with Mental Health Disorders, Narcolepsy, Body Dysmorphia, Death of Children, Borderline Personality Disorder, Hallucinations, Complex PTSD, and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder.*

# Statistics

## Effects of Inadequate Support

The top 5 emotional responses reported in the workplace are:



Stress

**75%**



Burnout

**65%**



Difficulty asking for help

**55%**



Unable to create time for yourself

**45%**



Not able to regulate emotions

**33%**

\*\*Respondents have selected multiple answers for this question

The analysis reveals that diminished autonomy over work-life balance, emotional dysregulation, and ongoing pressures within the workplace are directly linked to the heightened stress levels and burnout reported by employees. The industry must investigate and implement changes aimed at mitigating these demands and pressures. Establishing a balance between employees' physical and psychological well-being and the business's operational requirements is crucial for creating a healthier, more productive work environment.

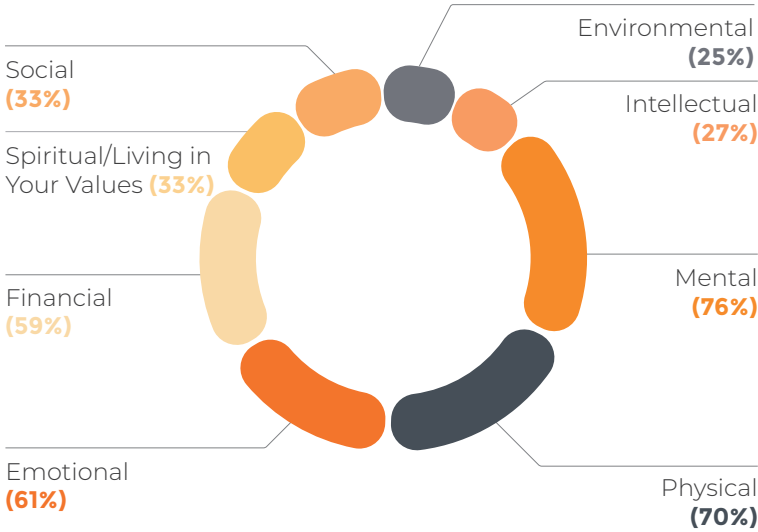


We are taught to be in flight or fight and produce high volumes of adrenaline and cortisol but not how to turn it off after service.

*-Anonymous Survey Respondent*

# Statistics

## Wellness Concerns



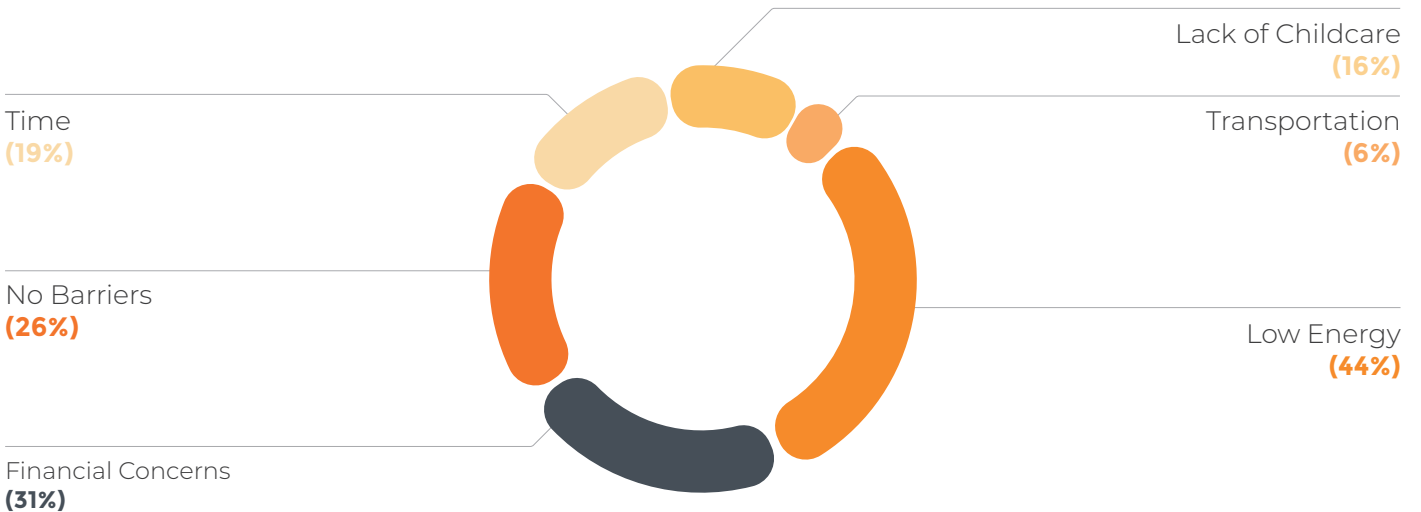
\*\*Respondents have selected multiple answers for this question



The industry needs drastic and immediate changes in favor of employee wellness, or I am certain it will collapse altogether.

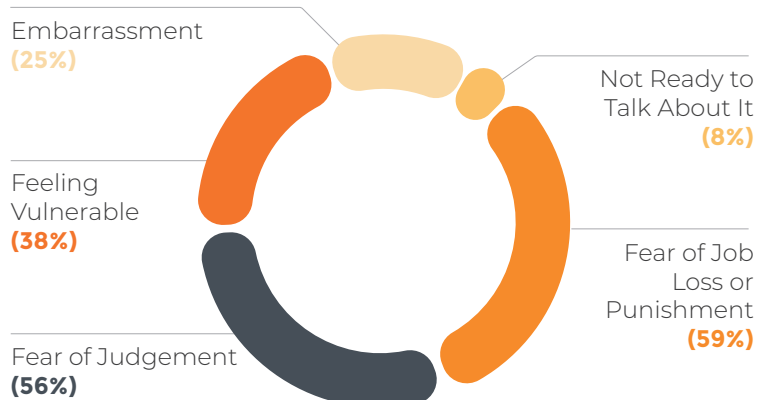
-Anonymous Survey Respondent

## Barriers to Help Seeking



\*\*Respondents have selected multiple answers for this question

## Barriers To Company Trust



\*\*Respondents have selected multiple answers for this question

The primary barrier to trusting companies with mental health concerns for men is the fear of judgment, affecting 20%. For women, the fear of job loss or facing punishment stands out as the major reason, impacting 43%.

# Statistics

## Perceived Hospitality Industry Culture

Believe sharing concerns, expressing problems, and challenging others is safe

42%

Experience group decision-making.

30%

Say their company places a strong influence on who is boss.

39%

Say their company values inclusion and promotes a sense of belonging and value.

40%

Feel that their company values self-motivation and the ability to bring new ideas.

39%

Believe vulnerability is viewed as a weakness in the workplace.

24%

\*\*Respondents have selected multiple answers for this question

**Open Communication is Moderately Valued:** With **42%** of respondents feeling safe sharing concerns, expressing problems, and challenging others, there appears to be a moderate level of openness in communication.

**Inclusion and Belonging Need Enhancement:** Only **40%** of individuals believe their company values inclusion and promotes a sense of belonging, suggesting that a majority do not feel fully valued or included.

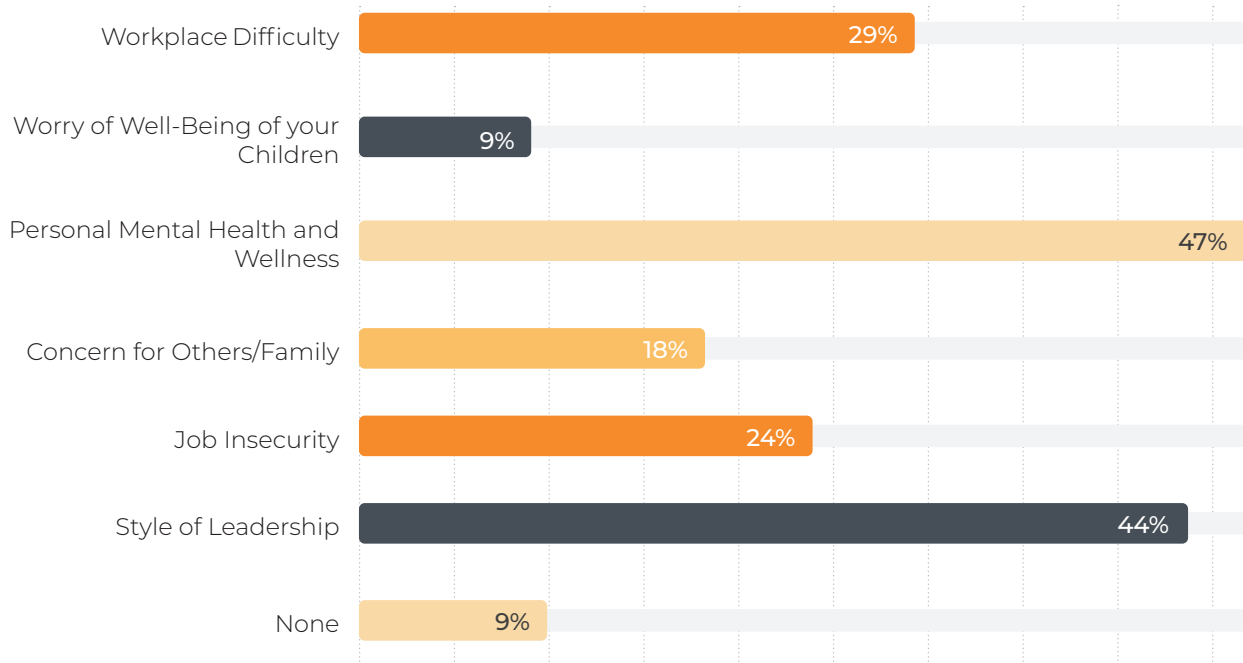
**Collaborative Decision-Making is Limited:** Only **30%** experience group decision-making, which implies that decision-making processes might be somewhat centralized.

**Innovation and Self-Motivation are Recognized:** **39%** of respondents feel their company values self-motivation and the introduction of new ideas, suggesting that there is some recognition for innovation and individual initiative.

**Hierarchical Structures are Prominent:** **39%** perceive a strong emphasis on hierarchical positions ("who is boss") points to a potentially traditional organizational structure where authority and position are emphasized.

**Vulnerability is Often Misunderstood:** **24%** believe that vulnerability is viewed as a weakness, suggesting a perception that can stifle open communication and hinder the development of trust and strong interpersonal relationships within the workplace.

## Negative Impacts on Job Satisfaction and Performance



\*\*Respondents have selected multiple answers for this question

**Mental Health and Wellness Concerns are Paramount:** With **47%** of the impact attributed to mental health and wellness, it's evident that the psychological well-being of employees plays a significant role in their job satisfaction and overall performance.

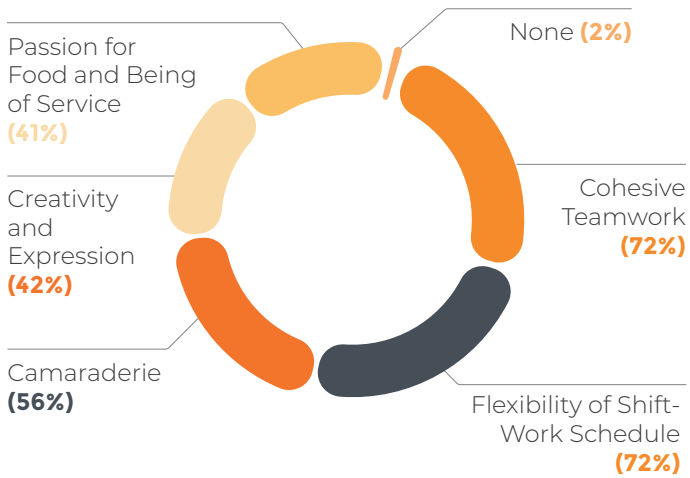
**Leadership Style Matters Greatly:** The fact that **44%** attribute their job dissatisfaction and performance issues to the style of leadership indicates a strong connection between how employees are managed and their work outcomes.

**Workplace Challenges are a Significant Factor:** Difficulties within the workplace, identified by **29%** of respondents, including interpersonal conflicts, inadequate resources, or unclear job roles, can significantly deter job satisfaction and hinder performance.

**Job Insecurity Contributes to Discontent:** With **24%** pointing to job insecurity as a factor affecting job satisfaction and performance, it's clear that stability is a critical concern for employees.

# Statistics

## Positive Impacts on Job Satisfaction and Performance



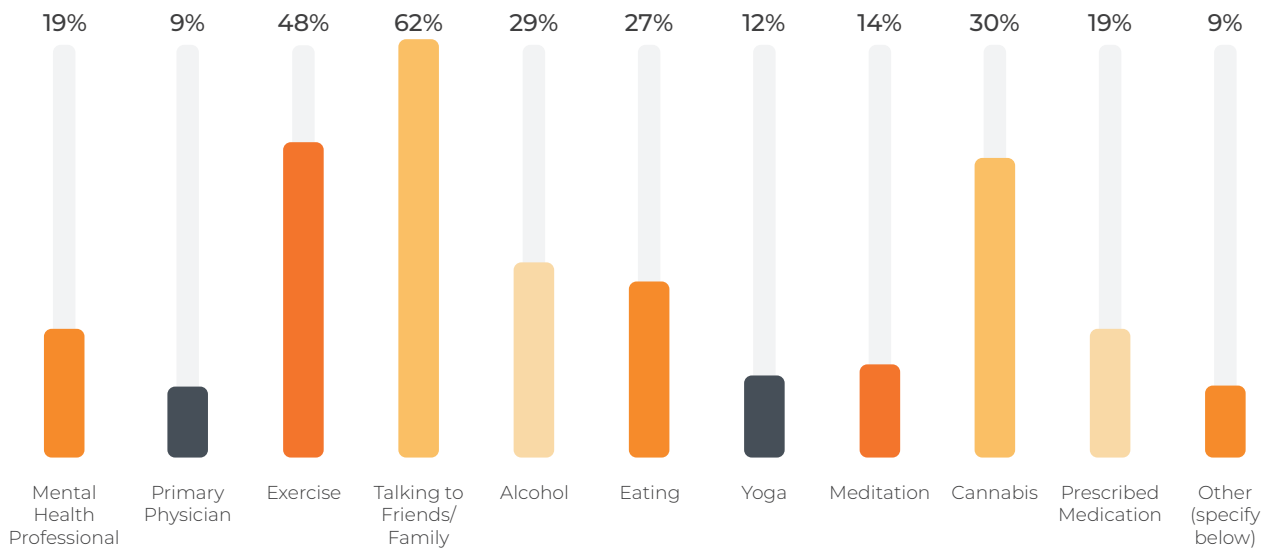
\*\*Respondents have selected multiple answers for this question



Working in an environment where you feel celebrated matters. When you feel tolerated, work becomes another burden in your life.

-Anonymous Survey Respondent

## Current Coping Mechanisms



\*\*Respondents have selected multiple answers for this question

The preferred coping mechanisms among hospitality employees, ranked from most to least used, are talking to family and friends, exercising, using cannabis, consuming alcohol, and eating. This indicates a reliance on both healthy (social support and physical activity) and potentially risky choices (substance use and emotional eating) to manage stress. The trend suggests the industry needs to provide comprehensive wellness programs, focusing on stress management and promoting healthier coping strategies to address the underlying causes of stress more effectively.

# Their Stories

These are some of the current perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs of hospitality employees detailed within the survey.

“ I love my job and almost everything about it. But it’s a hard fight to keep up for no benefits or retirement. I feel I work very hard to create return customers and regulars for an industry that isn’t designed for long-term employees and that would rather turn them over.

“ I think practicing gratitude daily, especially at work, would impact all FOH employees.

“ Improve the work-life balance for the entire team, not just the top tier. Have more outings and team-building initiatives that are not around drinking. Provide more education around leadership to help improve how the teams are treated and have a more unified outcome to the worker experience. Look forward to seeing the follow-through on change and not just talking about it. Actions need to happen, and the story needs to change.

“ Hospitality company leaders value and give us the freedom to create/bring new ideas, but also have their own agenda which is ultimately what will happen. That sometimes makes it pointless to put in the time to create ideas when they have already decided the outcome behind the scenes. I think this could be remedied with more honest communication.

“ The majority of restaurant employees end up going out after a long shift to unwind and spend their hard-earned cash on alcohol. Then they wake up not well rested, not properly nourished, dopamine deprived, probably feeling like trash, and have to go to work and take care of others’ needs as a poorer version of themselves. This cycle is the norm. It is very toxic and not maintainable for living a happy and fulfilling life. Working in a restaurant should be sustainable, but we have to fix the core values of this industry and make health and wellness a priority.

“ I would like to see Leaders motivate employees in a positive manner instead of just seeing them as numbers and dollar signs. Give them a discounted gym or yoga studio membership. Integrate a culture that is safe to discuss mental health and burnout in the busier season. I think our service industry has taken a negative turn since Covid, but we as leaders haven’t changed.

“ I would like to see events and teambuilding not revolve around alcohol for those of us in the industry who are trying to live a more mentally stable life.

# Summary

The hospitality industry is characterized by its distinctive and demanding nature, presenting specific challenges that are less common in other sectors. Workers in this domain are particularly vulnerable to elevated stress and burnout, increasing their risk of experiencing mental health issues such as anxiety and depression, among others.

This study illustrates that mental health, substance use, and wellness issues often stem from workplace cultures that inadequately support employees' psychological safety and may even inadvertently contribute to the stigma around these issues. This is particularly concerning given that **52%** of respondents expressed willingness to engage in professional mental health services, with an additional **34%** considering it. However, more than half of these individuals do not seek the help they may need, predominantly due to fear of judgment within their workplace.

Employers must adopt and enforce a zero-tolerance policy toward mental health stigma, thereby cultivating a workplace culture that actively promotes and advocates for mental health awareness and supportive practices. In committing to these principles, businesses will naturally become attractive to job seekers and current employees who value a workplace that prioritizes psychological safety, mental health, and overall well-being.

## 86 the Stigma in Hospitality Organizations

The initial and crucial step towards eradicating mental health stigma in the hospitality industry is to implement a comprehensive and inclusive management training program. This program would equip leaders with the necessary tools and understanding to create a supportive environment for mental health and wellness.

Eliminating the mental and emotional health stigma within hospitality organizations through management training involves several key strategies.

- Education and Awareness equip managers with knowledge about mental health issues, including their prevalence, impact, and misconceptions. Understanding the basics of mental health can help dismantle myths and reduce stigma.
- Empathy and Communication Skills Training promotes empathy among managers through training that emphasizes active listening, compassionate communication, and non-judgmental support. Managers should learn how to approach sensitive conversations and respond appropriately to disclosures of mental health challenges.
- Policy and Procedure Education ensures managers are well-versed in the organization's policies regarding mental health, including confidentiality, support services, and accommodation processes. They should know how to navigate and apply these policies effectively.
- Ongoing Support and Resources provide managers with access to resources they can offer employees, including information about external mental health services, employee assistance programs, and wellness initiatives within the organization and the community.
- Regular Check-Ins and Feedback Loops encourage managers to conduct regular check-ins with their teams assessing team morale and well-being to establish feedback loops where employees can share their experiences and suggestions for improving mental health support.

A heartfelt thank you to all the hospitality professionals who contributed their time and shared their truthful perspectives within the study. A special acknowledgment goes to [www.mediamastersgroup.com](http://www.mediamastersgroup.com) for graciously offering their talent and time. The involvement of each participant is crucial in encouraging open conversations and helping to dismantle the stigma surrounding mental health within the hospitality sector.